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ABSTRACT

A study of reader response to stylistically poor prose indicated that the negative effects were greater if the topic was familiar to the readers. The readers were not measuring the stylistic quality of the text, but rather, the texts were measuring the cultural information of the readers. It is not possible to separate reading skills from the particular cultural information that the reader possesses. Teachers cannot teach reading and writing well if they neglect, by concentrating on technique, the particular cultural knowledge they should be teaching. Assuming that there exists a body of cultural content that defines true literacy, teachers should participate in an effort to define cultural literacy and encourage a more balanced union of form and content by resisting the drift toward making composition a separate area of expertise. Illiteracy is a deficiency in cultural information as well as reading and writing skills and can best be repaired by a combination of literature and rhetoric, of linguistic form and cultural content. This is not the task of English teachers alone, but of teachers all across the curriculum. (HTH)

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READING, WRITING CULTURAL LITERACY

E.D. Hirsch, Jr.

In this talk I shall focus on a neglected topic in the pedagogy of reading and writing, namely content. I don't mean to say that content is neglected as an abstract necessity in our pedagogical theories, but only that our theorists pay little attention to particular contents in the classroom. That seems to be perfectly natural. Reading and writing are skills, are they not? And a skill is something (is it not?) that once learned, can be applied to any content. That is the assumption upon which our reading and writing theories have usually been based. But, for reasons I shall mention, that assumption has led us so much to neglect particular contents that we have necessarily fallen short also in imparting the formal skills of reading and writing.

Some in this audience will sense that my present emphasis on content--on what we teach people to read and write--represents a reversal for me, a shift from, and even a contradiction of, some of the sentiments I expressed in The Philosophy of Composition in 1977. There, my emphasis was strongly on the teaching of skills in writing--and by extension, in reading. I argued that the teaching of writing was the imparting of habitual skills that could be transfered from one writing task to another. I urged teachers to avoid adulterating composition courses with

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such distracting contents as logic, poetry, fiction, or the history of rhetoric. I argued that composition was a practical subject in its own right--a transferable technique like stroking a tennis ball. Moreover, I suggested that all we needed to teach this skill effectively was still more research into the most efficient ways of teaching its various sub-skills. That was therefore the reseach program I advocated.

Why have I now changed my mind? I will tell that story briefly, in the expectation that my concrete experiences in large-scale reading and writing research might also serve to persuade others of the dangers of neglecting particular contents.

My research began with an assumption and a goal. My assumption was of course that reading and writing are transferable skills. My goal was to base the stylistic evaluation of writing on its actual reader-effects. Thus, I reasoned, if a piece of writing was stylistically degraded in a certain way, its degree of badness would be reflected in the differential effects of the good and bad versions on two large groups of readers. We supposed that because reading and writing are skills, and because the reading skills of two large groups were matched, two things would happen. First, the two groups would read the same text the same way. Second, the two groups would exhibit the same differential effects when pairs of texts that were stylistically degraded in the same way.[1] In short, if we calibrated the reading skills of our two groups, we could always find the same effects in the same stylistic degradations.

The first assumption turned out to be true--namely that

two reader groups at a particular session would read the same text in the same way. But the second assumption proved false, namely that the same degree of stylistic degradation would always have the same differential effects on two similar groups. As matters turned out, if a paper topic was familiar to our readers, the effect of stylistic degradation was relatively big, but if the paper's topic was unfamiliar, the differential effect became small. Moreover, if our audiences were artificially made familiar with the topic, the original small effect became big. Another way of achieving that same disconcerting result, was simply to present the text pairs to two university groups on one occasion, and to two community college groups on another. To community college students, a familiar topic like Grant and Lee proved to be as unfamiliar as Hegelian metaphysics.[2]

Because of this unexpected result, we found, paradoxically, that our readers were not measuring the stylistic quality of our texts, but rather that our texts were measuring the cultural information of our readers. What had started out as a test of writing quality ended up as a test of ~~the~~ cultural literacy. We therefore had to abandon our starting assumption that reading and writing are transferable, technical skills. We found on the contrary that it was not possible to separate reading skills from the particular cultural information that our readers happened to possess. Of course, I don't expect my quick summary of these results to have quite the same disorienting effect on others as they had on me. Our experiments were conducted over many months with many audiences. Although we

explored numerous ways of nullifying the effects of these cultural variables, we had not the slightest success. Only when such realities repeatedly hit one on the head do one's cherished ideas get changed.

Now, speaking as an ex-formalist, I believe I see clearly why pedagogical formalism had been the dominant assumption of reading and writing theory. Apart from its political attractions which I'll mention later on, the great intellectual attraction of pedagogical formalism is the one that dazzled me when I was writing The Philosophy of Composition--it was the idea that we could teach people how to write in a short time by teaching them the underlying principles that are common to all writing tasks. Teach students, I thought, the forms and principles, and the contents will take care of themselves. That has been the dominant hope in the history of American educational theory. Let pupils learn such formal skills as, how to think, how to read, how to write, and then let them apply these skills to the multifarious domains of life beyond the school. Quite naturally, this has also been the guiding idea of composition theory--through all its internal debates whether "process vs. product," or "logic vs. linguistics."

Our pedagogical emphasis on skill rather than on particular contents may now have gone so far that technique itself has begun to suffer. That is the view of our best researcher in the field of reading --Richard C. Anderson, who recently held a press conference on his findings and was duly reported in the Washington Post of November 30, in a piece by

William Raspberry.

"They're Teaching too much Reading"

"The reason our children are such poor readers is that we spend too much time teaching them [how] to read.

"That, at least, is the intriguing conclusion of an educator who has spent a lot of time looking at the problem of reading in the nation's public schools. And as contradictory as it sounds, he made a good case for his contention during a recent press conference at the Rayburn House Office Building.

"The real problem, as reflected in standardized tests, national assessments of education and other measures of pupil achievement, is not the thing we normally think of when we talk about reading: learning to pronounce words and to understand their meanings. The problem is in reading comprenhension: teaching children to think about what they read.

"'National test scores show that American schools have been making steady progress in teaching young children the fundamentals of reading,' Richard C. Anderson, director of the University of Illinois Center for the Study of Reading, said at the Nov. 16 conference. 'However, scores are still poor in the middle and upper grades where more complex reading and thinking skills are required.

"'We are now quite sure we know some fundamental reasons for poor performance. Careful analysis of reading programs has revealed that children are not being given enough help in learning to think about what they read.' Too much classroom time is spent on workbook exercises that are irrelevant--and often

counterproductive--to the goal of reading with comprehension, he said.

* * *

"No adult is interested in reading for the sake of reading, and there is no reason to suppose that children are any different--at least after the exhilaration of learning the basic skills. . . .

"Anderson's seemingly paradoxical thesis may turn out to be altogether reasonable: the way to improve our children's reading is to spend a lot less time teaching them [how] to read."

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One of the important findings in Anderson's more technical publications applies equally to both reading and writing, and this is his key point: What is written down or read typically takes for granted a great deal more information about the topic than the explicit surface features of language can possibly state.[3] Teaching that emphasizes the linguistic and rhetorical features of writing is thus inherently incomplete. The manipulation of technical features--including rhetorical, audience-oriented features, carries so much hidden, unspoken information that the linguistic and rhetorical features themselves are the smaller part of the transaction. The larger part is the silent, cultural dimension, which consists of brute information, not technique.

As a very brief example of my point, let me mention some of the current attitudes toward the enhancement of students' vocabulary. Ever since the heyday of generative grammar 15 or 20

years ago, the most sophisticated view of writing pedagogy has been that vocabulary should be a minor element of instruction. As linguists say, vocabulary is "merely a lexical matter"--by which they mean something accidental to the permanent formal structure of language. But this view is incomplete. Anderson and others have shown that the conventions and vocabularies of writing constitute a subtext that cannot be detached from the text. The repeatable surface elements of language cannot be successfully detached from vast domains of underlying cultural information, and an essential aspect of that information is knowledge about the world contained in knowledge of words. Moreover, if we take vocabulary in its largest sense as a knowledge of all sorts of particular linguistic conventions, then this of brute information is an essential part of the repertory of language. Information is not detachable from linguistic structure.

What does this undetachability principle imply for our teaching? It means that we cannot do a good job of teaching reading and writing if, we neglect, by concentrating on technique, the <u>particular</u> cultural vocabularies that we want to teach. To teach form alone is to perpetuate illiteracy even at the level of form. To teach reading and writing well, we can't reside comfortably in rhetorical expertise, but must make difficult decisions about which <u>particular</u> cultural vocabularies we wish to impart to our students. And if that is so, we will need to ask, is there a central canon of cultural information that is analogous to the central canon of literature? Is there a

cultural content that defines true literacy?

Just for a moment let us suppose that such a body of cultural information exists. And let us call it's possession "cultural literacy." My argument is that you cannot have linguistic literacy without cultural literacy, that competence in reading or in writing cannot go further than the cultural information which reading and writing presuppose. Hence, cultural literacy is not just an abstraction, but a reality on which our success in teaching linguistic literacy depends.

But what in principle is cultural literacy? Can it be defined? Can it be consciously and explicitly sought? Let me suggest a purely structural definition: cultural literacy is that knowledge which enables a writer or reader to know what other writers and readers know within the literate culture. Thus, it is not only a knowledge of convention and vocabularies, it is also a knowledge that this information is widely shared by others. Moreover, since this shared culture is changing at its edges, the content of cultural literacy is also changing. New things become part of it and old things drop away--even while the more permanent central core remains. For instance, over the past few years, the term "DNA" has become part of cultural literacy. It is a word, the use of which requires not just our own vague information, but also a sense of the vague information we share with other literate people. A much older word in cultural literacy might be, for instance, "Shakespeare," while a less certain word in current literacy might be the word "Spenser."

I suppose that we all have a vague sense of what cultural

literacy is--of what is at its center and what is at its unstable periphery. But this vague sense is not enough. I think we cannot teach linguistic literacy well until we take explicit, political account of the concept of cultural literacy, and make it an explicit goal of our teaching. That is a politically difficult move, of course--and a dangerous move because it smacks of a ministry of culture. But to leave the matter entirely to individual teachers or institutions--without even offering them guidance or suggestions regarding particular cultural contents is a neglect of our professional--even our technical responsibility--as teachers of literacy. Example: the curriculum guide to English-teaching in high schools for the State of California offers not a single title of a single text as an appropriate content for courses in reading and writing.

While that is a politically safe approach, which avoids controversy as well as tyranny, it leaves the student open to the greater tyranny of one teacher's whimsy as well as the tyranny of ignorance. I believe that the Modern Language Association, NCTE, State Councils on Education, and the various national academies can hammer out compromises and specific goals for cultural literacy. At least they could try to do so, and nothing would be more useful in fostering technical reading and writing skills.

Besides participating in such an effort to define cultural literacy, our profession can also foster improvements in reading and writing by another sort of political act. We can encourage a more balanced union of form and content by resisting the drift towards making composition a separate empire of

expertise. If Anderson and others are right, composition is not a special subject apart from its particular cultural contents. Writing conventions are not formal linguistic and rhetorical conventions, but are changing elements of cultural knowledge. There is a technical, formal side to composition, of course, but its best application requires cultural, not technical goals. The rôle model for English teachers is still the great eighteenth-century Professor of English, Hugh Blair, who was called "Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres." His task was the double one of teaching the technical skills of exposition as well as the cultural knowledge that is inseparable from those skills. He was professor of composition and literature. His great book on writing, which taught so many generations, was a book on both linguistic literacy and cultural literacy.

Illiteracy then, is not merely a deficiency in reading and writing skills. It is also a deficiency in cultural information. This double deficiency is best repaired in the traditional double way by a combination of literature and rhetoric, of linguistic form and cultural content. This is not to suggest that the job of teaching cultural literacy belongs to the English teacher alone. Of course not. Contributing to the broad knowledge that I have called "cultural literacy" is (or should be) a goal of all teaching in high schools and colleges. English teachers do have, though, a special, traditional responsibility for filling in the more egregious knowledge gaps that they find in their students. No other field is so close to living language as literature is, so close therefore to the cultural

presuppositions of language . Fortunately for students, no other field is so vaquely conceived. No one has ever defined "literature" as the word is actually used. The strictly fictional and aesthetic conception of literature is hardly more than a century old, and can be easily swept aside in favor of a more serviceable concept bound up with general culture. Literacy is best conveyed by teachers who themselves exemplify--not just teach--a high degree of cultural literacy; by composition teachers who are literate, and by literature teachers who are experts in composition. The inherent doubleness of writing--of linguistic form and cultural content--requires an answerable doubleness in ourselves.

Notes

1 Stylistic degradation meant changing parallel constructions to non-parallel ones, and putting important ideas in the middle rather than the beginnings or endings of sentences. It did not mean changing the original phrasing. Essentially, the versions were kept synonymous.

2 The reader cannot be expected from this short description to understand the details of the experiment. Fuller accounts can be found in the following: David Harrington and E. D. Hirsch, Jr., "Measuring the Communicative Effectiveness of Prose," in Writing, ed. J. Domininc, C. Fredricksen, N. Whiteman (Hillsdale, N. J.: Erlbaum Associates, 1981) and in E. D. Hirsch, Jr., "Culture and Literacy," Journal of Basic Writing, 3, 1 (1981),27-47.

3 See M. S. Steffensen, C. Joag-Des, R. C. Anderson, "A Cross-Cultural Perspective on Reading Comprehension," Reading Research Quarterly, vol. 15,#1 (1979), 10-29.